



## The Oregonian

### **Not another field burning study**

**State environmental regulators ignore Oregon history by denying Lane County's plea to halt the annual fires**

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Remember the Willamette Valley's infamous "Black Tuesday"?

You certainly do if you were in the Eugene-Springfield area on Aug. 12, 1969. On that Tuesday afternoon, smoke from burning grass seed fields blackened the skies over the metropolitan area so severely that Gov. Tom McCall was compelled to rush from Salem to see it for himself.

Standing on a butte in Eugene, McCall gazed out at the enshrouded city and dubbed it "the scene that can't be seen." He ordered an immediate 10-day moratorium on field burning, and the next Oregon Legislature mandated a permanent ban on it, effective in 1975.

Now, flash forward 38 years to August 2007. Willamette Valley farmers are still burning fields, and residents of the south end of the valley are still choking on smoke and are mad as hell about it.

The tough actions of the McCall era turned out to be just tough talk, dissipated by four decades of aggressive lobbying by the grass seed industry. Meanwhile, public health advocates in Washington state and Idaho pushed successfully for bans on grass seed field burning, leaving Oregon as the only state in the Northwest that refuses to declare it to be the hazard it is.

Decades of studies have shown that the fine particulate matter in field smoke is harmful, and not just to people with respiratory illnesses. But guess what Oregon environmental regulators came up with last month when the Lane County Board of Commissioners demanded an immediate ban on field burning?

More studies.

Incredibly, in a series of unanimous votes, the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission rejected the ban and instead ordered agency officials to ask the Legislature to fund a new study of the effects of breathing smoke, and a study of possible alternatives to the annual burning of grass fields after harvest.

These questions have been studied to death in the nearly four decades since McCall stood on that butte in the middle of Eugene. Field smoke is indeed a health hazard, and economically viable alternatives to the burning of grass fields do exist, as reflected by the fact that most grass acreage in the Willamette Valley is no longer burned.

At the August hearing on Lane County's plea for a burning ban, some farmers made demeaning comments about Eugene residents behaving like "elitists" and "extreme radicals." Those growers should have to listen to one of their own neighbors, 68-year-old Carolyn Higgins, tell the story of being trapped briefly in her car, and then for hours in her rural Harrisburg-area home, by thick, sickening smoke from a nearby grass field.

That day, Aug. 30, 2007, was Higgins' "Black Thursday," says her daughter, Holly Higgins, who has moved out of the home temporarily to escape this season's remaining burning.

"We don't need another study in this state," she observes perceptively. "We need an end to field burning."

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